

Vietnam War veteran takes his place in Fairfax history

- By Angela Woolsey/Fairfax County Times Sep 14, 2018

Kim Balzer does not remember his brother well. He was a mere nine years old when Specialist Michael Arlin Balzer died in a jungle clearing near the village of Suoi Tre in Vietnam on Mar. 21, 1967, killed at 22 years old while trying to hold off a Viet Cong regiment that launched a surprise attack on his company.

Michael Balzer's actions that day posthumously earned him the Silver Star and Purple Heart, but to his family, it mostly meant years of grief and the loss of memories they had yet to make with a son and brother who had only just grown into adulthood.

Anecdotes from Michael's childhood or teenage years eventually trickled out to reveal a more detailed picture of the kind of person he had been.

For instance, the Fairfax High School graduate spent a lot of time with friends at Tops Drive-Inn, a popular hamburger joint that opened on Fairfax Circle in 1957, and he once poured soap detergent into a fountain that used to stand in front of the building now called Mosby Tower, causing water to flood Main Street.

When Kim and his wife, Debbie Balzer, donated Michael's Silver Star, Purple Heart, and various other mementos to the City of Fairfax Historic Collections on Sept. 6, they were joined for a solemn ceremony at the Fairfax Museum by surviving members of Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry.

The possibility of giving Michael's medals to a museum first came up in 2016 when the Balzers received a phone call from William Page Johnson, who currently serves as the City of Fairfax's commissioner of the revenue, but previously wrote for the Historic Fairfax City, Inc., newsletter *The Fare Facs Gazette*.

Johnson met Kim and Debbie in 2008 to interview them for an article called "Remembering Mike" that was published in the *Gazette's* spring 2009 issue.

This time, he asked if the family would be willing to loan the Silver Star and Purple Heart medals to the Fairfax Museum for a six-month display.

Though Debbie quickly agreed to help, nothing much happened until Philip Mahoney, a friend of Kim's, started organizing a donation ceremony for the medals that was originally scheduled to take place on Mar. 21, the anniversary of Michael's death.

A snowstorm-prompted cancellation ultimately turned out to be a blessing in disguise, allowing Mahoney, Johnson, and the other organizers to rearrange the event to coincide with Alpha Company's 51st annual reunion.

Surviving members of the company meet up in a different U.S. city every year, and this year's designated city just so happened to be Washington, D.C.

Prior to the ceremony at the Fairfax Museum, Kim and Debbie Balzer, Alpha Company, and Fairfax City Mayor David Meyer visited Michael's gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery. They also stopped by the house on Brookwood Drive where the longtime Fairfax City resident grew up.

"It's a very unique experience for me," retired Col. John E. Sweeney, who was the commanding officer for Michael's platoon, said. "I have written many letters home to families about their soldiers had died in our organization. It's the first time that I saw the house where my not-too-welcome letter arrived. That was particularly moving for me to have that happen."

Born in Dayton, Ohio, on Jan. 7, 1945, Michael Balzer graduated from Fairfax High School in 1963 and was drafted into the U.S. Army in September 1965, according to Johnson's Fairfax Gazette article.

After completing basic training, Michael was assigned to Alpha Company's 4th Platoon in the 3rd Battalion and 22nd Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division, which was stationed at Fort Lewis in Washington for advanced infantry training.

Sweeney describes Michael as a “strong patriot” who was committed to doing his job but did not hide his criticisms of the Army. Like the rest of his platoon, Michael eagerly volunteered when their leader suggested going to the range for the weekend to practice firing mortars.

Alpha Company shipped out to Vietnam in 1966.

On Mar. 19, 1967, Michael’s unit arrived at a jungle clearing known as Landing Zone Gold near Suoi Tre, a village located about 55 miles northwest of the city then called Saigon.

Assigned to provide security for a forward artillery base, Michael and his fellow soldiers spent Mar. 20 establishing three bunkers with eight guns each and about 450 infantrymen from Alpha and Bravo Companies to support the artillery, according to Johnson’s article.

Because the Viet Cong typically attacked at night, the two companies were taken by surprise when their opponents instead launched an attack after dawn on Mar. 21.

As Alpha and Bravo Companies fell back to an inner perimeter, Michael maintained his position and defended his compatriots with an M-60 heavy machine gun. He was mortally wounded but held off the advancing enemy troops long enough to save the rest of his company.

Sweeney wrote the recommendation that garnered Michael a posthumous Silver Star, which is the third-highest military combat decoration that can be awarded to a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, though he told Johnson in 2009 that he regretted not putting Balzer up for Medal of Honor consideration.

The Medal of Honor is the highest military decoration awarded by the U.S. government.

The Purple Heart, which Balzer also received, is the oldest award still given to combat-wounded veterans in the U.S. military, according to the Purple Heart Foundation.

From the time he got drafted to the day before he died, Michael conveyed his experience in the Army through letters to his parents and his best friend, Robert Lucas, who kept the 20 or so letters he received.

Lucas gave the first and last letters he got from Michael to the Fairfax City Historic Collection, which will display them along with the medals and a shadow box of other artifacts as part of an upcoming exhibit at the Fairfax Museum.

Titled the “Fairfax Story,” the exhibit will use Balzer’s story to give visitors a local perspective of the Vietnam War and the surrounding historical and political context.

“By looking at Michael Balzer, we’re able to tell his story, to honor him, and to also broaden his story for the context of particularly the 1960s and the Vietnam War,” Fairfax Museum curator Susan Gray said. “...I always like to tell our students that, no matter if your family’s been here for 100 years, whether you’ve been here for 100 days or 10 days, you’re part of this Fairfax history, and certainly Michael Balzer was part of that.”

Balzer is one of two Fairfax High School alumni who were killed in the Vietnam War, according to Meyer.

A 1959 Fairfax High graduate, Robert Thurston III became a warrant officer in the Army and served as a helicopter pilot when he died on Dec. 18, 1964.

According to a National Archives list of fatal U.S. military casualties from Virginia, 15 people killed in the Vietnam War identified Fairfax City as their home of record.

“Michael Balzer is part of that tradition of remembering, reflecting so it continues to ground us and fortify us for the things we need to do in the future,” Meyer said. “It’s also a reminder that this exercise in self-governance that we call democracy at the local level is a gift, and it’s a gift that was purchased at great cost by many generations. Michael Balzer is emblematic of the finest traditions of our city.”

HEADQUARTERS
25TH INFANTRY DIVISION
APO San Francisco 96225

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 2249

31 May 1967

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

1. TC 300. The following AWARD is announced.

BALZER, MICHAEL A. US52659073 SPA E-4
Co A, 3d Bn, 22d Inf, 3d Bde, 4th Inf Div

Awarded: Silver Star (Posthumously)

Date action: 21 March 1967

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

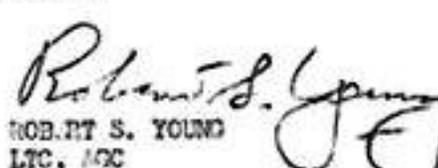
Reason: For gallantry in action: Specialist Four Balzer distinguished himself by heroic actions on 21 March 1967, while serving as a machine gunner on a combat operation. At 0630 hours, a heavily reinforced Viet Cong regiment attacked the perimeter with human wave assaults, rocket fire, and mortars. Specialist Balzer was located in a bunker near the heaviest assaults. As the bunkers in his sector were destroyed by enemy rocket and mortar fire, the enemy forces began to overwhelm the entire sector and were attempting to mass toward the center of the perimeter. Specialist Balzer, seeing this critical situation, nevertheless refused to leave his position. Placing his machine gun directly between the advancing enemy and the artillery position he was defending, he continued to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy force until he fell mortally wounded. Specialist Balzer's extraordinary heroism in close combat against a numerically superior Viet Cong force was in keeping with the highest traditions on the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 9 July 1913, and USARV message 16695, 1 July 1966.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

JASPER J. WILSON
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff


ROBERT S. YOUNG
LTC, AGC
Adjutant General

Michael Arlin Balzer

Specialist Four

A CO, 3RD BN, 22ND INFANTRY, 4TH INF DIV, USARV

Army of the United States

Fairfax, Virginia

January 07, 1945 to March 21, 1967

MICHAEL A BALZER is on the Wall at [Panel 16E, Line 128](#)

See the [full profile](#) or [name rubbing](#) for Michael Balzer

